

Caspar Van Senden, Sir Thomas Sherley and the 'Blackamoor' project*

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Abstract

This article investigates the project of Caspar Van Senden, a Lübeck merchant, and his patron Sir Thomas Sherley, who sought crown permission to collect 'negars and blackamoors' in England and sell them in Lisbon. By examining the reports of Robert Cecil's agent in Lisbon and letters written to Cecil by Van Senden and Sherley, it explains how unsuccessful their project was, and how it may have had political as well as financial motivation. It also reinterprets the privy council order of 1596, and concludes that a similar document of 1601, conventionally listed as a proclamation, is likely never to have gone beyond draft form. The article concludes that Elizabeth's government never envisaged an expulsion of blacks, but was merely trying to fend off another debtor with a patent.

Fitzdodderel: What is a Proiector? I would conceiue.

Ingin: Why, one Sir, that proiects Wayes to enrich men, or to make 'hem great.

Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), I. vii.

More recently, early modern projectors have been defined as: 'those enterprising proto-capitalists who sought to turn new manufacturing, or agrarian, techniques to profit, and who sought alliance with the government to protect their investments, preferably through the newly structured device of the grant of monopoly rights.'¹ From the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, William Cecil had pioneered the granting of patents to projectors.² However, a patent gave a projector the right to impose a fine on anyone he thought was encroaching on his monopoly, and this provoked bitter resentment, as became clear in the monopolies debates in the parliaments of 1597 and 1601.³ Joan Thirsk has labelled the period from 1580 'the

* Some of the material in this article has appeared earlier in M. Kaufmann, "'The speedy transportation of blackamoors': Caspar Van Senden's search for Africans and profit in Elizabethan England", *Black and Asian Studies Association Newsletter*, xlv (2006), 10–14.

¹ F. Heal and C. Holmes, 'The economic patronage of William Cecil', in *Patronage, Culture and Power: the Early Cecils 1558–1612*, ed. P. Croft (2002), pp. 199–229, at p. 199.

² J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978), p. 53.

³ Thirsk, p. 65.

scandalous phase' of projecting. One particularly scandalous project has hitherto been overlooked by historians. It has all the hallmarks of the sleaze associated with patents of monopoly in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign: a foreigner was licensed, a bankrupt courtier tried to get in on the game, and the crown issued the licence in the first place in order to repay a debt.⁴ To modern eyes, however, perhaps the most scandalous feature of this project was the intended commodity: the 'negars and blackamoors' of England.

On 18 July 1596, an open warrant to 'the L[ord] Maiour of London and to all other vyceadmyralles, Maiours and other publicke officers' stated that:

Casper van Senden a merchant of Lubeck did by his labor and travell procure 89 of her Ma[jesty's] subiectes that were detayned prisoners in Spaine and Portugall to be released, and brought them hither into this Realme at his owne cost and charges, for the w[h]ich his expences and declaration of his honest minde towards those prizoners, he only desireth to have lycense to take up so many Blackamoors here in this Realme and to transport them into Spaine and Portugall.

The privy council was well aware that this deal made good financial sense. Van Senden's transporting of prisoners 'could not be don w[i]thout great expence'. Instead of repaying that outlay, the crown needed only grant this licence. No wonder her Majesty 'doth thincke yt a very good exchange'.⁵ A similar deal had been made with one Edward Baynes a week earlier, on 11 July 1596, when 'direction' was given to 'this bearer Edward Banes to take of those blackamoors that in this last voyage under Sir Thomas Baskerville were brought into this realme the number of tenn, to be transported by him out of the realme'.⁶

However, Van Senden was not very successful. While by 1600 he had reputedly released and brought home a further 200 English prisoners from Portugal, he had also run into debt. In an undated petition to Robert Cecil he 'prays for protection from his creditors for three months'.⁷ This he obtained, as we learn from a letter to Cecil from William Andrews. The latter arrested Van Senden for a debt of sixty pounds, only to find a warrant in his possession which certified that he was under Cecil's protection. Andrews 'prays that Cecil will not impute to him the doing of anything in contempt' of this warrant.⁸ Van Senden also managed to obtain the patronage of Sir Thomas Sherley. Sherley had been treasurer-at-war, but went bankrupt in 1597, and was later charged with embezzling £35,175 from Queen Elizabeth, although the real amount may have been

⁴ Thirsk, pp. 54, 57, 59.

⁵ *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, ed. J. R. Dasent (46 vols., 1890–1964), xxvi. 20; The National Archives of the U.K.: Public Record Office, PC 2/21 fo. 306.

⁶ *A.P.C.*, xxvi. 16–17; *T.N.A.*: P.R.O., PC 2/21 fo. 304.

⁷ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Salisbury MSS.*, xiv. 89 (original held at Hertfordshire, Hatfield House (hereafter Hatfield), Petitions 399).

⁸ Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, xiv. 154 (Hatfield, Petitions 153).

much higher.⁹ On 29 November 1600, he wrote to Robert Cecil asking him to 'assent to the matter' of Van Senden's 'suit concerning the blackamoors' for 'his good' – it seems that Sherley hoped to profit from the venture, and go some way to relieving his own fortunes.¹⁰ A month later, on 29 December, Sherley wrote again to thank Cecil for his 'willingness touching the suit'.¹¹ Unfortunately, as Sherley's biographer D. W. Davies puts it, 'the patent proved unprofitable to both Van Zenden and Sherley'.¹²

This was not the only project that Sherley was pursuing in these years. In the fifteen-eighties he had acquired a patent to supply an iron furnace in Sussex with wood, and a 'fishing grant' which, in return for a payment of £300, empowered him to prosecute the occupiers of lands concealed from the true owners, the dean and chapter of Norwich. This grant was alleged to be worth £2,000 per annum. In 1604 he was awarded a patent to collect small crown debts, such as recusancy fines, and in 1607 he was granted the right to collect fees on illegal conveyances.¹³ However, none of these schemes came to fruition. As the dean of Norwich cathedral remarked, Sherley was 'a very strange man to deal withal; promising much, but of a contrary mind to perform nothing'.¹⁴ His only successful idea seems to have been that of selling baronetcies in 1611, but it was the crown that would ultimately reap the profits of this.

The reason for the failure of the 'blackamoor' project is clear from Sherley's letters. The original warrant of 1596 stipulated that the 'blackamoors' were only to be transported 'with the consent of their masters'.¹⁵ In an undated petition to the queen, Van Senden asked for 'full power, licence and authoritie' to 'take up and carry away into Spain and Portugal all and any the Blackamoors that he shall finde in any place or places within this your Majestie's Realme of England, *without the lett or interruption of their masters or any other persons*'. Sherley claimed that the original warrant had not been effective as he

together with a Pursivant did travell at his great Charges into dyvers partes of your highness Realme for the said Blackamoors, But the masters of them, perceiving by the said warrant that your orator could not take the Blacamoors without the Master's good will, would not suffer your Orator to have any one of them.¹⁶

⁹ J. Pennington, 'Sherley, Sir Thomas (c.1542–1612)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25435>> [accessed 28 Feb. 2005] (hereafter 'Sherley', *O.D.N.B.*).

¹⁰ Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, x. 399 (Hatfield, Cecil Papers 250/71).

¹¹ Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, x. 431 (Hatfield, Cecil Papers 82/85).

¹² D. W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant: the Strange Fortunes of Sir Thomas Sherley and his Three Sons, as well in the Dutch Wars as in Muscovy, Morocco, Persia, Spain and the Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), p. 188.

¹³ 'Sherley', *O.D.N.B.*; Davies pp. 185–92.

¹⁴ E. P. Shirley, *Stemmata Shirleiana or, the Annals of the Shirley Family, Lords of Nether Etindon, in the County of Warwick, and of Shirley in the County of Derby* (1841), p. 254.

¹⁵ *A.P.C.*, xxvi. 21.

¹⁶ Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, xiv. 143 (Hatfield, Petitions 151) (author's italics). This is probably the petition Sherley enclosed in his letter to Cecil in Nov. 1600.

Thus, in a draft proclamation of 1601 it is stipulated, to 'some stronger purpose'¹⁷ than the 1596 warrant, that

if there be any person or persons which be possessed of any such blackamoores that refused to deliver them in sort aforesaid, then we require you to call them before you to advise and persuade them by all good means . . . if they shall eftsoons wilfully and obstinately refuse, we pray you to certify their names to us to the end her majesty may take such further course therein as it shall seem best in her princely wisdom.¹⁸

But is this draft merely what Sherley was 'bold to send your honour enclosed how farr it is to stretch' with his letter of 29 December 1600? Sherley wrote that the 'matter beyng by your former favor comyted to Mr Secretary Herbert x dayes past lyeth yet as it dyd in respect that Mr Caesar his servant hath lost as is said the note of her majesties pleasure therein'.¹⁹ From this letter it is unclear whether Queen Elizabeth ever authorized the 1601 draft. It certainly seems foolhardy for historians to insist on putting the words of the 1601 document into her mouth.²⁰ It also seems to highlight the way in which unwelcome petitions could be delayed indefinitely by prevarications of this nature.

What is clear is that masters were unwilling to lose their African servants. Sherley's letters to Cecil in November and December 1600 reveal the latter's own misgivings: 'your honour thought it not meet to have those kind taken from their masters compulsorily'; 'when I moved your honor you semed not to lyke that a commission of that nature, to take what pleased him, should be committed to hym Selfe [Van Senden]'.²¹ This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that Cecil was the master of 'Fortunatus a blackmoor seruant', buried at St. Clement Danes, London in January 1602.²²

Thirsk suggests that some projects had a degree of philanthropic motivation.²³ The 'blackamoor' project was clearly a mercenary one, but its projectors still attempted to justify it on more palatable grounds. The 1596 warrant argued 'that those kinde of people may be well spared in this Realme being so populous and nombers of hable persons the subiects of the land and xpian [Christian] people that perishe for want of service, whereby through their labor they might be mayntained'.²⁴ This suggests that removing the 'blackamoores' would ease the pressure of population on the labour market, and would thus be good for society. The sentiment

¹⁷ Hatfield, Cecil Papers 82/85.

¹⁸ *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin (3 vols., 1964–9) (hereafter *Tudor Royal Proclamations*), iii. 222; Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, xi. 569 (Hatfield, Cecil Papers 91/15).

¹⁹ Hatfield, Cecil Papers 82/85.

²⁰ A. Loomba, *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, 1989), p. 52; P. Fryer, *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain* (1984), p. 8.

²¹ Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, x. 399, 431.

²² M. Sherwood, 'Blacks in Tudor England', *History Today*, liii (Oct. 2003), 40–2, at p. 41.

²³ Thirsk, p. 22.

²⁴ *A.P.C.*, xxvi. 20; *T.N.A.: P.R.O.*, PC 2/21 fo. 306.

echoes that of the letter written the week before, giving Edward Baynes leave to take away the ten 'blackamoors' from Baskerville's ship, which stated that 'manie for want of Service and meanes to sett them on worck fall to Idlennesse and to great extremitie'.²⁵

That the removal of ten people from the country would have much effect on this problem seems unlikely. The argument is to be found again in the 1601 draft, which asserts that 'blackamoors' 'are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume'.²⁶ Given the numbers of 'blackamoors' and the numbers of English people suffering from unemployment and starvation at this time, it seems likely that the only relief from poverty with which the projectors were concerned was their own. It is nonetheless interesting that they attempted to justify their proposal in this way.

Van Senden, the merchant of Lübeck, was clearly hoping to profit from his undertaking. But given that he seems to have failed to collect any 'blackamoors', why did he persist over the years in rescuing at least 289 English prisoners? We know that he was a regular trader in Lisbon – for example, he gave depositions in the case of Swarts vs. Halliday, on 5 July 1596, giving evidence in support of Jeremiah Swarts that he had been conned by Wiliam Halliday in that city.²⁷ We learn a little more of him from the reports of William Resould (alias Giles Van Harwick) to Robert Cecil, filed from Lisbon, in the years 1598–9.²⁸ Resould was a London merchant with experience of trade in Spain and Morocco, who received a yearly retainer of 400 ducats (plus 100 ducats for travel) for his services.²⁹ In January 1598 he wrote:

6 days past here arrived hance Van Sanden who brought about 50 Portingalls and Spaneyards from Plimouth who sayth he hath orders from the counsel to treat about the libartie of the Inglish that are prisoners and captives as wel here as in al other places of Spain.³⁰

By February, 'The procedinges of *Gaspar Van Sanden* about the *English prisoners* hath bin here altogether crossed by [Edward] *Baynes* . . . to procure a *second spy's voyage*'.³¹ In May, it seemed that 'the poor Inglish who remayne in the castel . . . shal be presently sent awaye som by Gaspar Van Senden and others by Porter'.³² Thus it becomes clear that Van Senden was not the only merchant plying this trade in prisoners, and that the 'blackamoors' may have been a sideline to a more conventional exchange

²⁵ A.P.C., xxvi. 16–17; T.N.A.: P.R.O., PC 2/21 fo. 304.

²⁶ *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, iii. 221–2; Hist. MSS. Comm., *Salisbury MSS.*, xi. 569 (Hatfield, Cecil Papers 91/15).

²⁷ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1595–7*, p. 251; T.N.A.: P.R.O., SP 12/259/53.

²⁸ All the following letters were written from Giles Van Harwick (alias William Resould) to Peter Artson, merchant of London (alias Robert Cecil).

²⁹ A. Haynes, *Invisible Power: the Elizabethan Secret Services, 1570–1603* (Stroud, 1992), p. 138.

³⁰ T.N.A.: P.R.O., SP 94/6 fo. 2.

³¹ *Cal. S.P. Dom. 1598–1601*, p. 25; T.N.A.: P.R.O., SP 94/6 fo. 10. Italics denote words in cipher.

³² *Cal. S.P. Dom. 1598–1601*, p. 41; T.N.A.: P.R.O., SP 94/6 fo. 44.

of Spanish for English prisoners of war. It remains a possibility that some of the Spanish prisoners of war were of African descent – there was a company of moriscos serving in the Armada.³³ However, Resould did not comment on the ethnicity of the Spanish prisoners in his letters.

The 'enlargement' of prisoners was clearly not an easy task, and it could not be done merely out of 'charitable affection'. There was little financial reward – Van Senden acted at his own expense. And yet, in February 1598 Baynes competed with Van Senden for the privilege of transporting prisoners. One possible motive, continually implied by Resould, is that of espionage. In January 1598 he wrote 'let specyall order be taken . . . for all such *mariners* . . . for that under that tytel com *seminaries* into *England*. A *fleminge* reported that *Banes* brought over three of them'.³⁴ This was such classified information that key words in the text were written in cipher. Van Senden was not exempt from suspicion. In April 1599, Resould wrote 'of one Cap Fowel, who Imbarked from hence in companie of Jespar van Senden and his suspicious consorts'. Fowel had 'gevenge out to be a Catholike' and fraternized with the Spanish authorities 'promising great matters for landinge of forces in England'. Resould suspected that 'he is gone to viewe what ther passess and so to retorne with intelligence'.³⁵ So perhaps Van Senden was rescuing English prisoners in order to help Catholic spies. His English patron, Sir Thomas Sherley, belonged to a family with a recusant reputation.³⁶ It is at least possible that this project was not motivated solely by sordid financial concerns.

The Van Senden episode has been interpreted as a piece of racist immigration policy, indicating Elizabeth's desire for the 'preservation of the white race'.³⁷ and compared in scale to the expulsion of the Jews by Edward I in 1290.³⁸ However, it was of an entirely different nature. While in 1290 Edward's government made a tidy profit by collecting the Jews' debts on their behalf and selling their houses, no one managed to make much money in 1596–1601. Edward's edict had banished all Jews, giving them safe conduct on the condition they left the country by a certain date. Elizabeth had no such universal intention, merely making a local bargain with a persistent merchant. The 'blackamoor' project was just one of the many scandalous proposals made by merchants and courtiers in the later part of her reign with an eye (if a somewhat short-sighted one) for profit.

³³ M. Gracia Rivas, *Los tercios de la Gran Armada de 1587–8* (Madrid, 1989), pp. 150–1. The author owes this reference to Geoffrey Parker.

³⁴ *Cal. S.P. Dom. 1598–1601*, p. 10; T.N.A.: P.R.O., 94/6 fo. 4.

³⁵ T.N.A.: P.R.O., SP 94/6 fo. 214.

³⁶ 'Sherley', *O.D.N.B.*

³⁷ Loomba, p. 52.

³⁸ F. O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (1974), p. 2. See R. Huscroft, *Expulsion: England's Jewish Solution* (Stroud, 2006).